



**(U) Write Right: Avoiding SIGINT-isms**

FROM: [REDACTED]  
of the Reporting Board (S12R)  
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*...A follow-up to the "Index of Forbidden Words" article (U)*

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(U//FOUO) Another continuing debate in the reporting world concerns the use of "possible" and "possibly" (as well as "probable" and "probably") in reporting. A request from the field for arbitration on this matter led the Reporting Board to update the entry on those terms in the [SIGINT Reporter's Style and Usage Manual](#) :

(U) "Possible" is an adjective and modifies nouns, but the usage "a possible scenario" is a SIGINT idiom that has no parallel in ordinary English. In everyday English, no one would say "The baby swallowed a possible penny," but reporters often write that a military unit "conducted a possible exercise." It is argued that this usage has the advantage of brevity and is well understood by military customers. This is true, but other considerations may override the argument; for years now, reporting classes have instructed analysts to write reports in a more "journalistic" style that is less stilted and closer to standard English. This is partly to get reporters to hone their communications skills, to enable them to convey more accurate information and to present different aspects of a report to different audiences with ease.

(U) For instance, journalistic style would use "The unit conducted what may have been an exercise" or "The unit may have conducted an exercise" rather than the old-style "The unit conducted a possible exercise" or "The unit possibly conducted an exercise." (Note the difference in nuance here: the first sentences convey certainty that the unit conducted something and uncertainty about what that something was; the second convey a lack of certainty about what the unit was doing.)

(C) A more important factor is that this push to write for a variety of audiences is also part of the DCI's initiative to sanitize as much information as possible for as many different customers as possible. Sanitization necessitates disguising the fact that information came from COMINT; this is another important reason instructors urge reporters to avoid the obvious NSA-ese exemplified by "a probable F-15." It's much easier to get into the habit of writing "what may have been a fighter aircraft" or "what may have been an F-15" in the first place than to have to change it for the sanitized portion of the report.

(U) "Possibly" is an adverb modifying verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs. Do not use it to modify nouns. Instead of "a possible regiment," use "a unit, possibly a regiment."

(U) The same guidance applies to "probable" and "probably."

(U//FOUO) The Reporting Board has been revising and updating



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the entire Style Manual and questions like these help indicate what entries are most (or least) useful, and which ones are out of date, so keep those cards and letters coming, folks!

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